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ABSTRACT

The rural Negro population has been of public concern since the slave status was defined and an ideological defense of that status began to take shape. When slavery ended, a definition of the Negro status in custom and in law was undertaken wherever Negro people were concentrated. Controls were devised to "keep the Negro in his place." That place for decades was to be in the rural South and largely in the agricultural enterprises until the impact of World War I was felt in the United states. In order to place a discussion of the rural Negro at a conference identified with W.E.B. DuBois several references are mentioned and discussed. By 1970, 80 percent of the black population is in urban places and nearly 74 percent are in metropolitan areas. No more than half (53 percent) of the black population is southern, and in no state is the black population much more than a third. The black farmers who remain are highly concentrated, specialize in cash crops, and operate small units with little monetary return. Current trends do not encourage hopes for a resurgence of blacks in agriculture in the South. Despite what appears to be a high rate of reproduction the black farm population is diminishing. There is a high rate of out-migration from rural populations, and the number of children is diminishing relative to the total population. A high proportion of the black children in rural farm areas are those of people who are dead, who are living elsewhere, or who are members of subfamilies whose heads are not household heads. (Author/AM)

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# RURAL BLACKS - A VANISHING POPULATION

by

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The rural Negro population has been of public concern since the slave status was defined and an ideological defense of that status began to take shape. When slavery ended, a definition of the Negro status in custom and in law was undertaken wherever Negro people were concentrated. Controls were devised to "keep the Negro in his place". That place for decades was to be in the rural South and largely in the agricultural enterprises until the impact of World War I was felt in this country.

The special fitness of a discussion of the rural Negro at a conference identified with W. E. B. DuBois may not be clear to some conference participants. A few references may be in order. At the University of Berlin in Gustav Schmoller's seminar, DuBois developed a paper on the subject, "The Plantation and Peasant Proprietorship Systems of Agriculture in the Southern United States".

After he came to Atlanta University, Dr. DuBois made several studies of the rural Negro for the U. S. Department of Labor. The reports on three of his studies were published in the Bulletin of the Department of Labor. Bulletin Number 14, January 1898, carries his report on "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia". The second appeared in Bulletin Number 22 on "The Negro in the Black Belt", and the third "The Negro Landholder in Georgia" was published in Bulletin Number 35. For the 1900 Census, DuBois wrote an analysis essay on the Negro farmer.

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These studies are surveys of the classic type. DuBois spent the months of July and August 1897 in Farmville and Prince Edward County. He reported that "A Century ago the county had a population of 8,000 evenly divided black and white", at the time of study the county had "a population of over 14,000 with the increase almost entirely among the blacks, the number of whites remaining under 5,000". He gave special attention to the section of Farmville known as Israel Hill and populated by descendants of the slaves of John Randolph who had been freed and given the land at Randolph's death. In 1895 the tax record showed that Negroes in Prince Edward County owned 17,555 acres of land with an assessed value of land and buildings of $132,188.66.

Attention was given in the study to individuals who had made success and the social process of succession. Among his success stories was that of the slave brickmaker who bought his own freedom, bought the freedom of his family, bought his master's estate and hired the former master to work for him.

More interesting was the pattern of succession which he described as an influx of immigrants from the countryside into Farmville where raw country lads were trained for industrial life while other Farmville young people were sent North and East, "more or less well-equipped for metropolitan life."

Another very perceptive observation referred to the Negro family and the process of its advancement.

> "The proportion of children under 15 is also increased by the habit which married couples and widowed persons have of going to cities to work and leaving their children with grandparents. This also accounts for the small proportion of children in a city like Philadelphia".

Sociologists checking the family characteristics of rural Negro families reported in the 1970 Census were struck by the grandparent-grandchild pattern.

DuBois' study of "The Negro Landholder in Georgia", was published July 1901. By way of introduction, DuBois wrote, "This study, therefore, is an attempt to make clear the steps by which 470,000 black freedmen and their children have in one of the former slave states gained possession of over a million acres of land in a generation, the value of this land and its situation, the conditions of ownership, and the proper interpretation of these statistics as social phenomena." The descriptive statistics are detailed and well-ordered, accompanied by county maps of Georgia for each census enumeration from 1790 to 1890 showing the progression of the Negro population from the coast across the State. There are tables describing occupation and incomes of the black population with a tabulation of numbers of land owners and the acreage owned in each county in Georgia.

There are several observations of more than passing interest. One of these was of "several socialistic experiments which if encouraged might have led to interesting and instructive results." One of these was that of 10 freedmen who pooled their resources and together purchased a 700 acre sea island. In this paper there is a careful description into what DuBois calls the "Metayer" system involving arrangements between landowners, tenants, and supply merchants. A most provocative observation is that there is "increasingly large proportions of the total property of the State in the hands of town Negroes showing that it is not merely the idle and vicious that are drifting to town."

The first meaningful shift in the Negro population took place in the decade 1910-1920. In 1910, the South had 32 per cent of the nation's people, 15 per cent of its urban population and 46 per cent of its rural population. The rural population was 78 per cent of the total Southern population, in contrast to 41 per cent in the North and 51 per cent in the West. There were only nine cities in the South with 100,000 population.

There were 2,620,391 farms in the South with an average value of $2,900 in contrast to $9,500 in the North and $12,000 in the West. All farm property on Southern farms had an average value of $25 an acre. It had 99.7 per cent of all the land in the United States planted to cotton and in 1909, 65.9 per cent of all money spent on fertilizer in the United States was spent in the South. The South had 72 per cent of all the farm mules, 89 per cent of all the Negroes, and 65 per cent of all tenant farmers in the United States.

In many cotton fields virtual slavery was restored. The flagrancy of holding men in bondage was investigated by the secret service during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, and the reports led to an investigation of peonage by a committee of Congress in 1908.

As a matter of fact, while the Negro population of the United States increased from 4,441,830 in 1360 to 9,827,763 in 1910, the members of this racial group remained in their customary surroundings to the extent that the proportion the Negro population of the twelve states of the confederacy made up of the national total fell only slightly, or from 86.6 per cent in 1860 to 83.3 per cent in 1910. Even in the rural sections of these twelve states, the Negro population increased every decade of the period, almost doubled during the half century involved, and was at the maximum ever

attained (6,592,505) at the end of the epoch.

For more than half a century, while the native white and immigrant populations of the nation were pushing westward, filling up the newly opened sections of the country, making farms and homes of their own on the land that was to be had for the taking, the Negro population hardly budged from the same restricted portions of the country which it occupied at the time slavery was abolished.[1]

There were 264 counties, all of them Southern in which blacks constituted more than half of the population. Thus, in less than 150,000 square miles, about five per cent of the nation's area, lived 4,000,000 blacks, nearly 40 per cent of the black population of the entire United States. In Mississippi and Louisiana there were counties in which 90 per cent--(in Issaquena County, Mississippi, almost 95 per cent)--of the population was black, and in every state of the Deep South there were counties with 75 per cent or more black population.

In the decade 1910 to 1920 the urban population became greater than the rural population in the United States. The rural to urban trend of the Negro population followed that of the white population but at a slower rate. Between 1940 and 1950 the Negro became more urban than rural but the urban increase was influenced by Negro migration from the South. The rural black population still exceeded the urban black population but the rural population was declining while urban population was rapidly increasing.

Since 1940 there has been activity on Southern farm lands more furious than spring ploughing after a long wet winter. Seeds of grasses have been sown over acres on which for a century, more or less, plough

and hoe destroyed grass that cotton might thrive. Faithful trained mules who had names were scrapped, along with the crude farm implements they had drawn, and replaced by machines that could cultivate more acres in less time. On the outskirts of villages and towns factories were built in fields among the withered stalks that had borne last year's harvest. And, the reapers of last year's harvest were finished with harvesting. Ploughmen had been scrapped along with their ploughs and mules. In the new grasslands a lusher growth of oblong pattern marks sites of the demolished houses of people who have gone from the land.

Where cotton once grew on both sides of a road, now, for mile after mile, there are pastures and grazing cattle. Sometimes grass-covered terraces are a reminder that this was once a field in which row crops were grown.

In some places where cotton is still grown, cabins are no longer scattered about the fields in that expedient disarray that placed each family in the midst of the crop it was responsible for tilling. For tractors drawing gang ploughs, they were an inconvenience, and to aeroplanes spreading poison dust, they were a menace.

There are spots where the weatherworn cabins stand as they have been standing for decades and people seem to farm as they have been farming all their lives. Here the plantation system has apparently survived. Closer scrutiny shows that it really has not despite the "big house" standing as it has for decades and the grey cabins scattered as they have long been. Automobiles stand before the cabins and tractors are parked in sheds in the old mule lot. The commissary, traditional

gathering place during idle hours, is shuttered and bleak-looking, deserted. Other things not readily discernible make the plantation in the 1960's significantly different from the plantation in 1940.

Between 1920 and 1940 the full impact of the revolution in agriculture was felt. Farm technology speedily eliminated workers with a result in a migration that is generally referred to as an "exodus". The great depression caused a slowing down of this movement out of the South. There was actually an increase in the rural population of the South between 1930 and 1935. Not only did the depression slow the out-migration, it also influenced a significant reverse migration of people returning to farms. Despite this general trend, sharecroppers as a class decreased. There were beginnings of the putting of former cotton land into other crops which had much less labor demand.

In 1950 there were 571,393 fewer farms in the South than there were in 1930. Between 1940 and 1950, tenant farms decreased by 543,971. In 1930, 43.9 per cent of the farms in the South were owner operated. In 1950, 65.5 per cent were owner operated. The average size of farm in the South increased from 106 acres to 148 acres.

Farmers remaining on the land fared better than they had twenty years before. In 1940, 19 per cent of the farm dwellings were lighted by electricity; in 1950, 70 per cent were. In 1930 the average value of farm land and buildings were $3,800; in 1950 it was $8,600. The agricultural reform programme showed results. Infertile land was taken out of cultivation. Trees and grasses were planted on soil unsuited for the growing of row crops. Cattle growing became a major industry in the South. Planned production and diversified farming became the accepted practice. Better

varieties and practice gave increased yields from familiar row crops.

Between 1950 and 1960, the Southeast, excluding Florida, suffered a net loss of 3,154,000 people while during the 1960-70 decade the same 11 states lost 1,128,000 people[2]. Focusing on the black population, it becomes clear that the great decline in black rural residents has been from the farms[3]. In 1920 the black rural farm population numbered about five million persons and in 1970 less than a half-million persons. In the same period the black rural non-farm population increased from 1.8 million persons in 1920 to 3.7 million in 1970.

By 1970, 80 per cent (four-fifths) of the black population is in urban places and nearly 74 per cent (three-fourths) are in metropolitan areas, those spreading centers of economic and political activity that have come to dominate our lives. No more than half (53 per cent) of the black population is Southern, and in no state is the black population much more than a third. Contrast this with the situation on the eve of World War I when nine out of ten (89 per cent) blacks lived in the South and almost three in four (73 per cent) were rural. In South Carolina and in Mississippi, blacks constituted more than half of the total population and in the other states of the Deep South, the proportion was well above 40 per cent. From the Southern part of North Carolina through South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, and into Mississippi stretched the black belt, a contiguous group of counties in which blacks were the majority population. Along the Mississippi River the concentration of blacks intensified and spread into Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Further to the North in the tidewater counties of Virginia and the uppermost counties of North Carolina was another block of predominantly black

counties and in Central Florida, yet another.

There was a period when the great concern was about the condition of black tenants, especially sharecroppers in the South. The number of persons living on farms in rural areas of the United States was approximately 10 million in 1970. This number indicates a decline of about 6 million, or 38 per cent since 1960[4]. Traditionally, the South has had a great share of the farm population of the United States. For the first time the South was reported as not being the region with the most populous farm population. Between 1960 and 1970 southern farm residents dropped from 7.2 to 3.8 million and the South's share of the national farm total fell from 46 to 39 per cent[5]. Farm tenancy is no longer a valid concern because of the total Negro and other minority farm residents. In 1970, 78 per cent lived on owner-operated farms, but almost 40 per cent of these people were nonoperators, presumably working for wages on large enterprises[6]. In the South the farm population showed drastic decreases between 1966 and 1970. White owners had a decline of 11 per cent and black owners 32 per cent; white tenants and managers, 39 per cent and black tenants and managers, 51 per cent. Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South[7] reports that farm land owned by blacks declined from 12 million to 5.5 million acres between 1950 and 1969. The leading causes for black land loss were tax sales, partition sales, and foreclosures.

Though they could hope for little more than subsistence, the number of black farmers continued to increase through the census of 1920 when 925,000 black farmers were counted. During the early 1920's, however, the bollweavil spread throughout the cotton states and the number of black

farmers began a gradual decline. During the 1930's drought, depression, and the agricultural policies of the New Deal forced other blacks from the land and on the eve of World War I there were fewer than 700,000 black farm operators. War industries, the draft, and the unexpected continuance of prosperity after the war brought the number below 600,000 by 1950. Thus, from 1920 to 1950 there was continual out-migration of blacks from farm areas. What happened during the 1950's is better described as an exodus. From 1950 to 1969 the number of black farmers was halved and in the next ten years it fell by two-thirds. The average annual rate of decrease is indicated below:

Average Annual Rate of Decrease
in the Number of Black Farm Operators

| | Percent |
|---|---|
| 1920-1930 | 0.4 |
| 1930-1940 | 2.6 |
| 1940-1950 | 2.0 |
| 1950-1959 | 8.0 |
| 1959-1969 | 11.4 |

As of 1969 there were only 90,000 black farmers and the annual rate of decrease was such that the number would be cut in half every six years. We have not had an agricultural census since 1969 which would indicate whether a decline of this magnitude has continued, but it is clear that black farmers, who once constituted one out of every seven farmers in the United States, now represent no more than two or three per cent of the total.

Furthermore, the black farmers who remain are highly concentrated, specialize in cash crops, and operate small units with little monetary return. The black farmer is old and mortality alone will soon remove the greater majority.

As of 1969, 98 per cent of black farmers were in the South. In all of the rest of the country there were about 2,000, a fifth of whom were in the border state of Missouri. The only other non-Southern states with as many as 100 were Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Kansas, and California. In all of New England there were just 29 black farmers and in the vast territory of the Mountain States there were barely 100. This is simply a continuation of an old situation. Black farmers outside the South have never constituted more than a tiny fraction of the total.

Within the South also black farmers are highly concentrated. Approximately three-fifths are in the states of Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, and South Carolina. As of 1969, one out of five farmers was in Mississippi, mainly along the Delta and one out of seven was in North Carolina where they were concentrated in the bright tobacco area. Only in these two states were there as many as 10,000 black farmers.

Small as these numbers are, they can persist only if there is a sharp increase in the number of young blacks who become farmers. The average age of black farmers in 1969 was 54 and there was no state with as many as 50 black farmers where the average age was as low as 50. For the few farmers in New England, the average age was 58, and among the three Southern divisions the lowest was in the South Atlantic where it was 55.

It is hardly to be expected that old farmers working farms that averaged about 80 acres could engage in truly competitive agriculture. In the Agricultural Census farms are classified into several categories. Classes 1-5 are farms in which $2,500 or more of farm products are sold or

from which such sales would normally be expected. The remaining farms are those with less than $2,500 in sales and those which are operated as part-time or retirement enterprises. The great majority of black farms fall into the latter category. Approximately 65,000 fall into the low sales, part-time or retirement categories, leaving 25,000 with sales of 2,500 or more.

With such small and uneconomic farms there is no way in which the average black can expect to make a living by farming alone. He is, therefore, forced to work off the farm for a considerable part of his time. More than half of the black farm operators reported some work off the farm in 1969 and more than a third spent 100 days or more in non-farm work. Approximately one in four actually worked 200 days or more off the farm.

Farm operators, of course, are only a small part of the total farm population. In the earliest days almost 80 per cent of the total population and more than 90 per cent of the black population could be counted among the farm population. By 1972, however, the entire farm population was down to 9,600,000, less than five per cent of the total population. Of these, 870,000 were nonwhite. Blacks, therefore, constituted less than nine per cent of the farm population, about half as much as in 1960 when the number of blacks in the farm population was well above 2,000,000. As was true of farm operators, almost all of the black farm population was in the South and the rate of decline was approximately the same, accelerating from less than one per cent per year between 1920 and 1930 to more than ten per cent per year in the last decade. The numbers and proportions of the net migration from the farms to the cities and towns of the United States from 1933 to 1970 were estimated to be as follows: (1) farm wage

hands and the members of their households, about 5,250,000 persons, or 17.5 per cent of the net migration of over 30,000,000; (2) sharecroppers and the share "tenants" on southern plantations and farms, and the members of their households, 8,250,000 persons, or 27.5 per cent; (3) the operators of small general or subsistence farms and the members of their households, 11,000,000 persons, or 36.7 per cent; and (4) the operation of fairly large and considerably commercialized farms and the members of their households, 5,500,000 or 18.3 per cent[8].

In the analysis of the components of the vast exodus of people from the farms between 1932 and 1970 it is well to consider first the comprehensive estimate of workers on farms prepared annually since 1910 by the Crop Reporting Board of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. As indicated above, these estimates place the average number of persons working on farms in the United States in 1932 at 12,816,000. Of these, 9,992,000 were classified as family workers and 2,894,000 as hired workers. Sharecroppers and their children to whom no cash wages were paid were included in the category of family workers. For 1969, the estimates of the same agency place the average number of workers at 4,582,000, with 3,429,000 classified as family workers and 1,153,000 as hired workers. The decreases are 64.2, and 60.1 for all workers, family workers, and hired workers, respectively.

These data indicate that 78.9 per cent of the decrease in farm workers in the period 1932 to 1969, inclusive, was due to the fall in the number of family workers (including sharecroppers and unpaid members of their families). Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine accurately the number of persons involved in the families from which the family

workers were drawn, note the proportion of the total exodus accounted for by the decrease in the number of hired wage hands. The problem is complicated by the fact that several persons from the same family may figure in the hired labor force, and also because the number of hired workers on farms has been replenished to a considerable (although unknown) extent by the recruitment and introduction of workers from outside the United States[9]; the materials just presented, however, are more than likely more than 20 per cent, and possibly as few as 15 per cent of the persons who left the farms between 1932 and 1970 were hired farm workers or members of their families.

Current trends do not encourage hopes for a resurgence of blacks in agriculture in the South. Despite what appears to be high rate of reproduction the black farm population is diminishing. There is a high rate of out-migration from rural populations, no matter where situated, and the number of children is diminishing relative to the total population. A further confirming factor in the prospective decline is found in the composition of rural households. In such households in 1970, 17 per cent of all the children under the age of 18 were grandchildren of the head, and an additional four per cent were also not children of the head. These proportions were even higher for the youngest children. No less than 30 per cent of those under five were grandchildren of the head, and only 65 per cent were children of the head. Thus, a high proportion of the black children in rural farm areas are the children of people who are dead, who are living elsewhere, or they are members of sub-families whose heads are not household heads.

Cases are reported of the return of some blacks from urban industrial areas to the rural South. As yet, there are not enough of these to support claims of a significant reverse migration. Success stories of blacks who have retired at an early age with sufficient resources to undertake profitable farming are reminiscent of the success stories in the DuBois studies around 1900. Such noteworthy cases of individual achievement of success in agriculture may not be numerically significant.

Efforts to stabilize the operations of blacks remaining in agriculture through development of cooperatives have been described in Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South[10]. The expansion of the Agricultural Cooperative Movement will depend upon a more vigorous thrust than the present with their success despite the massive development of vertical farms and agri-business, a serious question. The four million rural non-farm blacks in the South are a population whose prospects as yet has no positive or encouraging prospects.

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